

Arthur Rothstein and The Great Depression

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Photographers do much more than capture a memory when they take a picture. They tell a story with that picture. Their photographs are also more than just a memory, but they are a part of history. History would not be anywhere close to what it is today if it were not for outstanding photographers such as Arthur Rothstein. He took numerous photographs of an era that is known as today as the Great Depression. His photographs are incredibly moving. His work allows people to get a taste of what it was like to live during that time. Although many will never truly understand what it was like to live through the Great Depression in addition to difficulties caused by dust storms, the works of people like Rothstein can help us develop an understanding.

In 1929, the stock market collapsed in the United States (“Photographs of the Great Depression”, n.d.). The 1930s was then referred to as the Great Depression, since the economy was in such poor shape. A part of President Roosevelt’s plan to help change the economy included the New Deal program. The Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) were portions of this program, which were both financed by the government. The FSA and WPA both hired artists to document the tragedy that was occurring in the United States related to the Great Depression through their art (photographs, paintings, etc.). Roy Stryker was the head of the FSA, which turned into a huge development, and was in charge of sending the different photographers to various places to record these hard times (“Photographs of the Great Depression”, n.d.).

One of the first photographers to work under Stryker was a man named Arthur Rothstein (“Photography and the Great Depression,” n.d.). Rothstein was previously one of Stryker’s students at Columbia University. Out of his 50 years career, Rothstein worked for Stryker for about five years and took approximately 80,000 photographs during that time period. Many of

his pictures became a great representation of the Great Depression era. He described his photographs as him wanting to educate others on the way that other people live their daily lives (“Photography and the Great Depression,” n.d.). Rothstein originally wanted to go to medical school, but stated that he enjoyed photography. He explained being a photographer at that time as being thrilling and gratifying that his pictures were making a difference (Doud & Rothstein, 1964).

Within an interview of Arthur Rothstein, he explained that Roy Stryker loved to speak to his photographers about new thoughts, and that he had them read several different books that they could pertain to their photography (Doud & Rothstein, 1964). Rothstein stated in this interview that Stryker did not mind what type of technique his photographers used to take their photographs. He explained how he was able to request the equipment and work with people in the photo lab. Rothstein gave credit to Walker Evans and Ben Shahn for helping him become a better photographer and teaching him elements of photography (Doud & Rothstein, 1964). He also describes how he began taking photographs using a Leica camera and described his interesting method of photography. He referred to his way of photographing people as the “unobtrusive camera, ” which means that the people he was photographing would not even recognize his presence (Doud & Rothstein, 1964). He described that sometimes he would spend some time getting to know people before he would photograph them, as he did for his first project working under Stryker. Rothstein also went into detail about how he learned how tiny elements of photographs can add to them, and how Roy Stryker taught him great things about the arrangement of elements within a photograph (Doud & Rothstein, 1964).

Beginning about the same time as the Great Depression, the dust bowl famine also caused many hardships for people that were already suffering (Amon Carter Museum, 2003). Portions

of Texas, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, and Oklahoma were some of the areas that were affected. These weather circumstances caused severe dust storms from strong winds that battered the soil. Pictures taken by different photographers demonstrated how much people affected by the Great Depression and the dust bowl famine needed the support from the government (Amon Carter Museum, 2003). Rothstein wanted to show people that were not familiar with the Great Plains the damage that occurred there during these dust storms (“Photography and the Great Depression,” n.d.). He not only wanted to portray the land, but also the lives of those people that were affected. Rothstein also utilized his photographs to convince the government to financially assist the Great Plains and initiate soil conservation efforts (“Photography and the Great Depression,” n.d.). Below are three different photographs of Rothstein’s photos of the Dust Bowl during the Great Depression and explanations of their significance.

Photograph #1

This photograph is one of Rothstein's most famous photographs and is often found when searching his work ("Cimarron: 1936," 2013). The photograph was taken in 1936 in Cimarron County, Oklahoma. The caption states that this picture is of a father and two of his children walking back towards what appears to be their house in a dust storm. The main focus is of the father and his two sons with the house in the background. The picture is black and white, and the waves of dust are noted on the ground within the picture. The sky appears to be somewhat dark and the land looks incredibly scarce and dry. The father is wearing a hat and is holding his head down, while his oldest son is walking next to him. The youngest son is trailing behind with his hands covering his face. He looks like he might be running. The viewer of the photograph is unable to see the facial expressions of any of their faces. The house appears to be built out of wood, and patched up in a few different places ("Cimarron: 1936," 2013).

The feelings experienced by this photo are a worriedness and sadness for this family. Looking at this photograph makes an individual wonder what this family was doing before they went inside. Overall, it makes one wonder if the dust became too much to handle and they were forced to go inside. The blurred look of the ground accentuates the existence of the dust. The fact that this photograph is a long shot emphasizes the scarcity of the area. Although it is a very simple photograph, it shows that this family does not have much by the plainness and poor structure of their house. If they are forced to go back inside because of the harsh dust storms, and not be able to do something productive such as work on their farm, this affects this family even more.

Photograph #2



This photograph was also taken in 1936, and is of clouds of dust over Texas (Doomsday: 1936,” 2013). This picture includes a long shot of a car that is driving in the distance towards

the viewer of the photograph. However, it is unknown if this car is packed with luggage or not, or the destination of the vehicle. Although the picture is black and white, it is clear that the sky is very dark. The land in this picture also appears very scarce and dry. It looks like there is a fence on one side of the road, but no livestock or crops are present. There are massive clouds of dust in the sky, which are incredibly obvious (“Doomsday: 1936,” 2013).

This photograph is something similar to a shot that would be seen in a scary movie. It truly shows the severity of the dust in the air and how deserted the area appears. Although it is a long shot, everything in the picture is still in focus. Like the first photograph, the distance at which the picture was taken emphasizes the desertedness of the land. The darkness and shadows definitely match the title of “Doomsday,” especially since the sky is so dark. It is unimaginable to think about what it would be like to live in those conditions, especially with the high winds and the dryness of the land. Although it appears that the dust is higher in the sky at that time, it seems like it would be difficult to drive in these conditions. There is also great curiosity about the people in the car when viewing this picture. What devastation have they been through? Where are they going? It makes one wonder if they are leaving that area in search of a better, safer place to live. This photograph gives a sense that the people in this car might be getting away from these dreadful weather conditions, and hopes that they find somewhere much better to go.

Photograph #3

This 1936 photograph of Rothstein was taken in Montana and is of a mother and her son who were forced to leave South Dakota related to the drought (“Starting Over: 1936,” 2013). This photograph is also in black and white. The focus of the photograph is a mother holding her little boy while looking at the camera, smiling slightly. The little boy is looking down as if he is playing with his mother’s shirt. Although it appears as though this family does not have much, they are neatly groomed. Behind them is a wooden wagon packed full of their belongings. In the distant background, it looks like there is a mountain (“Starting Over: 1936,” 2013).

This photograph is humble, but extremely touching. The fact that the woman and her child are placed directly in front in the wagon that is full of belongings stresses the changes that people were forced to make during that time. Overall, this photograph says a lot, but it still makes the person looking at it want more information simply because it sparks so much interest.

By looking in this woman's eyes, it appears as though she is tired and there are slight bags noted under her eyes. It appears as though this woman is forcing this slight smile that is on her face. It makes one wonder if she was actually doing everything in her power not to cry at this moment, or is she is truly just glad that there may be hope for the future ahead. This photo also portrays the innocence of a child. It makes an individual wonder if he realizes the hardships that people were suffering at that time, and hope that he is still able to live life like a normal child. This picture gives the viewer a sense of hope for this woman and her child. This hope is that their lives get better in the future and that things turn around for them. This picture makes the person looking at it wish they knew more about this family's history and their plans for the future.

The photographs that were previously discussed, as well as several more of Rothstein's photographs were very touching. Arthur Rothstein's photographs were often very modest, but could prove a point just by simply looking at the picture. He did a wonderful job of showing the way that people lived during the Great Depression and those that also faced hardships that lived in the Dust Bowl during that time. He portrayed how people lived in their environments and the rough living conditions with admirable photos. He also showed how people were forced to make changes because of these aspects, such as starting a new beginning. Rothstein gave us a better idea of what life was like at that time, and a part of American history that will always be captured thanks to his work.

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